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INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

Letter dated 21 November 1991 from the Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

With reference to the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), I have the honour to transmit to Your Excellency herewith the text of the Concluding Statement of the IDNDR Summit Conference on Earthquake and Natural Disaster Countermeasures, 1991, Japan, which was held from 8 to 11 October 1991 in Tokyo.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the text of the Concluding Statement as an official document of the General Assembly under agenda item 83.

(Signed) Yoshio HATANO
Ambassador Extraordinary
and Plenipotentiary
Permanent Representative of Japan
to the United Nations

ANNEX

Concluding Statement of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction Summit Conference on Earthquake and Natural Disaster Countermeasures, 1991, Japan

In observance of the second annual International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction, Japan hosted the IDNDR Summit Conference on Earthquake and Natural Disaster Countermeasures, 1991, Japan, from 8 to 11 October 1991 in Tokyo. Participating in the Conference were approximately 600 administrators, scientists and experts from 39 countries and 6 international organizations.

The participants reported on the damage caused by earthquakes and other natural disasters in various countries and cities of the world and discussed the disaster countermeasures they had taken (including prevention, preparedness, relief and recovery).

Large-scale natural disasters are having serious effects, especially on developing countries. The over-concentration of population is making cities, both in developed and developing countries, vulnerable to earthquakes, windstorms and floods. And as cities are built up further and become more complex, earthquakes may cause not only loss of life and damage to buildings but also paralysis of various urban functions and thus further setbacks to social and economic health. Recognizing that these are the problems natural disasters cause, participants in the Conference actively exchanged their views and experiences.

The natural phenomena which cause disasters will not cease, but through the efforts of the countries and cities of the world during this Decade, we shall be able to reduce the harm done to humankind and the damage to property as we approach the twenty-first century. The exchange of views and ideas at this Conference and the international network established among people engaged in disaster countermeasures will certainly contribute to the promotion of the goals of the Decade.

We who have participated in this Conference must further enhance the exchange of information, and the action plans for international exchange and cooperation for disaster prevention must be discussed in concrete terms.

In order to prevent or reduce adverse effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes, existing scientific and technical knowledge must be disseminated and applied. At the same time, we must promote the transfer of both within individual countries and between them in such a way that it can be applied to specific problems. Usually, a large-scale natural disaster does not strike the same place twice, and people quickly forget the danger. Public information activities to heighten awareness and disseminate disaster prevention knowledge are therefore important. This is a difficult task, but it must be pursued vigorously by every means possible. To cope effectively with earthquake hazards, structural and non-structural countermeasures must be

pursued in tandem, and there is a need to strengthen organizational arrangements for disaster countermeasures. There still remains much scientific research to be done in the field of earthquake prediction, but existing knowledge and information must be utilized with proper response.

We who have participated in this Conference share these views.

In the discussions that took place at each session, the problems that each country and city must address were described, and the necessity of further enhancing international cooperation pointed out. National and local governments, non-governmental organizations, private enterprises and scientific institutions must all play active roles to this end.

The following is a list of the major tasks that were identified:

1. To establish an effective method of hazard assessment, with due attention to the reactions and capabilities of the recipients and their needs and risks.

2. To devise land-use plans based on risk assessments and to provide guidelines for development plans.

3. To solve the technical barriers to the international transfer of knowledge, such as language differences.

4. To promote international joint research and knowledge transfer, taking fully into consideration the individual situations of both developed and developing countries.

5. To promote public education with regard to disaster countermeasures through the utilization of various channels and means such as the mass media, private enterprises and local organizations.

6. To raise public awareness about natural disasters among all age groups and to promote broad participation in volunteer activities for disaster countermeasures. Public education from childhood on is effective in stimulating such participation.

7. To promote the international exchange of information, prepare teaching and training materials for volunteer groups and encourage their use.

8. To establish legislative and organizational arrangements for disaster countermeasures.

9. To prepare pre-disaster hazard assessments and recovery plans based on long-term earthquake predictions and to enhance public knowledge about disasters, so that the general public will be well prepared for earthquake predictions when they are issued.

10. To exchange information on scientific data and research in the field of earthquake prediction, on the reaction of the public to earthquake predictions and on the experiences countries prone to earthquakes have had with public awareness programmes.

Through the discussions we have held at the IDNDR Summit Conference on Earthquake and Natural Disaster Countermeasures, 1991, Japan, we were able to identify these major tasks, and we regard this as another successful effort to promote the goals of the Decade. To cope with the disasters that we face, it is necessary to take immediate action based on the best knowledge currently available. We hope that this Conference will contribute positively to activities to prepare for natural disasters such as earthquakes, and that the points outlined here will be borne in mind by national and local governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations when they implement their action programmes to promote the Decade.

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DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION:
ENVIRONMENT; AND DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Letter dated 7 November 1991 from the Permanent Representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shakhlo N. Makhmudov, concerning international cooperation to save the Aral Sea.

I should be grateful if you would have the text of this letter distributed as an official document of the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly under agenda items 77 (e), 77 (f) and 78.

(Signed) Y. VORONTSOV

ANNEX

Letter dated 7 November 1991 from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan addressed to the Secretary-General

The fact that the republics of Central Asia were unjustifiably assigned a place and role as the principal agricultural raw material suppliers for the all-Union economy has created a very disturbing water-management and demographic situation that is also of extreme environmental concern in the region.

The long-standing policy of replenishing the water resources of Central Asia by diverting part of the flow of Siberian rivers and by harnessing the region's water resources exclusively for the development of industries with high water consumption has caused intensified desiccation of the Aral Sea.

Since the beginning of the 1960s the sea level has fallen by 15.6 metres and its average depth has fallen to 25 metres, uncovering more than 2 million hectares of seabed, the soils of which contain a centuries-old accumulation of toxic salts.

Sea and river navigation, fishing and fur farming have been brought to a halt, the problem of supplying drinking water has been seriously aggravated, and the deltas of the Syrdar'ya and Amudar'ya Rivers are being degraded over an area of about 1 million hectares. Wind transport of salt particles has increased.

Adverse socio-environmental factors have affected the health of the population: child and maternal mortality is growing, physical and psychological birth defects are increasing and the body's immune system is being weakened. There is the risk of a change in the human gene pool.

The sea is continuing to dry up and the adverse effects of upsetting the ecological balance and of desertification are growing.

As the situation stands, there is no guarantee against the complete merging of the Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts, which extend over an area of 650,000 sq km, with a further 10-per-cent expansion of the desert zone to cover the area of the Aral Sea.

The period of unease of the 30 million inhabitants of the republics of the Aral Sea basin is over; they entered a period of serious alarm. In our view, the problem of the Aral Sea should already cause alarm not only to the population in the States of the Aral Sea basin, but also, very probably, to the countries of the Middle East, whose water resources originate in adjacent mountainous areas and between which there are no natural barriers.

The purity of water resources, atmosphere, flora and fauna and other conditions affecting human settlement are necessarily a matter of concern already to the inhabitants of the adjacent States of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.

None of us is guaranteed protection from these new, adverse phenomena as long as the source of the environmental threat is not confined and is even spreading.

The Governments of the Union and of the States of the Aral region are taking all possible measures to preserve the Aral Sea and restore the ecological balance of the region.

The agricultural development strategy has been revised: extensive methods have given way to intensive methods; the economy is being restructured with priority emphasis on industries consuming little or no water; comprehensive measures are being instituted for water conservation and rational use of existing water resources by the national economy. In the irrigated area, the technical level of drainage and irrigation systems is being raised.

Steps have been taken for the priority development of drinking-water supply systems, the network of medical institutions for prevention and treatment, and plant cover on the dried-up seabed. One major task will be to ascertain the released-water discharge into the sea and the return flow.

However, studies of the water balance in Central Asia indicate that, given a high level of water demand and utilization, even with the construction of models for reduced water consumption by the economy, the Aral region already lacks sufficient of its own water resources to solve the problem of the Aral Sea.

Currently, the actual amount of water drawn off in Uzbekistan already exceeds not only the guaranteed 95 or 90 per cent probability flow, but even the average annual flow. A similar situation has also been observed in the other republics of the Aral Sea basin.

Under such circumstances, only years with between 50 and 100 per cent probability may be regarded as exceptions. In those years, the discharge of water into the sea may range from 18 to 40 km^3, but discharges in such quantities are unlikely, and they do not make it possible to maintain the level of the Aral Sea, from which approximately 40 km^3 of water evaporate annually.

The populations of the Republic of Uzbekistan and of the other republics adjoining the Aral Sea have placed their hopes in a 1990 agreement signed between the USSR and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for an international project on assistance in preparing a plan of action to save the Aral Sea. The initial diagnostic research conducted under the programme will enable information to be gathered that is essential for drafting the programme and the project.

But the environmental situation has been deteriorating with each year; the disaster area is spreading.

That being the case, it would be appropriate to regard the Aral ecosystem as a major ecological disaster region for the many millions of inhabitants of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the countries of the Middle East.

In view of the actual and potential worsening of the situation, the President and Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan have requested me to call upon you and upon all Members of the United Nations to give particular attention to this new ecological disaster region.

In that context, we place great hopes in the United Nations and ask it to undertake the following:

1. Bearing in mind the results of the implementation of the above-mentioned USSR-UNEP agreement, to consider the creation, in the city of Tashkent, of "Eco-Aral", an international research and consulting centre, the drafting of a programme for setting it up and, subsequently, the elaboration of a project to eliminate the sources of transboundary pollution and the destruction of the ecological balance in the Aral region, as well as to develop ways to restore the ecosystem.

2. In our view, the Eco-Aral Centre could be entrusted with determining the volume of expenditure needed to resolve this inter-State ecological problem.

3. We consider it essential to find a place for the critical socio-economic and environmental problems of the Aral Sea and surrounding region in the programmes of the World Health Organization (WHO) (the environmental physiology programme), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (the agricultural chemicals and wastes programme), the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) (the natural disasters programme) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (the education programme).

4. In our view, the Governments of the Aral Sea and Caspian Sea basin and of the contiguous States should, either directly or through UNEP and the World Conservation Union, conclude regional and subregional agreements for cooperation aimed at conserving and making sustainable use of transboundary ecological systems through joint-action programmes to combat such general problems as desertification and acid rain.

We think it would be useful to set up a regional association for cooperation in nature conservation for the countries of the Middle East. These countries could work together in drawing up plans to deal with an environmental emergency and in devising rapid-response measures in the face of critical situations and problems. They could devise and adopt coordinated general principles and recommendations concerning preservation of the environment and use of resources, particularly as applied to foreign trade and foreign capital investment.

The following measures for cooperation could be taken in order to assist Uzbekistan and the other States in the ecological disaster area:

- Provision and installation of effective water-desalination equipment and facilities for bottling drinking water;

- Supply of equipment and introduction of technology to recycle used water and toxic waste from the chemical and other industries;

- Assistance in equipping water-consuming industries with small-scale, highly sensitive instruments to monitor environmental quality;

- Organization of an automated system for monitoring the environment and river basins;

- Establishment of joint ventures to produce equipment to mechanize and automate water-saving methods of irrigation, and other irrigation technology;

- Assistance in equipping medical institutions with modern medical equipment and medicines.

We are also placing great hope in the outcome of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which is expected to formulate thematic recommendations in such fields as water-resource conservation and the fight against drought and desertification.

In August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic passed a resolution on the independence of Uzbekistan. We intend to work more closely with the programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations, especially UNEP, WHO and UNESCO.

We should like to participate actively in the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals (IRPTC) and the International Referral System for Sources of Environmental Information (INFOTERRA).

Practical, detailed ways of providing humanitarian, financial and technical aid might be discussed with a United Nations expert group, which we could invite to visit the Republic as soon as convenient.

We are deeply convinced that the formulation of programmes and projects for the environmental clean-up of large areas, which could then be tested as in the case of the Aral Sea and surrounding region, would provide many countries and States with invaluable help in the rational exploitation of the environment and in acquiring a profound knowledge of how the ecosystem evolves in stable zonal climates, and thus enrich environmental science.

Time is not on the side of the Aral Sea. If those who live in the region of the Aral basin do not start seriously questioning the future of the region, then nature will confront them with an even harsher question. In supporting this thought by the famous American scientist Lister R. Brown, we turn once again to the international community to help save the Aral Sea and surrounding region and to assist the Central Asian region in overcoming this socio-economic and ecological crisis.